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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the claims concerning the presumed language deprivation of lower-class blacks, and the findings of sociolinguists that refute these claims. The author asserts that the perceived deficiencies of non-Standard English were largely the product of middle-class intuitive assumptions concerning lower-class speech, and that recent investigators have shown that the relationship between the use of certain sociocultural language varieties and school failure is correlational, at best. Assumptions that (1) black children enter school being almost devoid of language: (2) there is more reliance on non-verbal communication in lower-class homes: (3) language is terse and not necessarily grammatical in lower-class homes: (4) lower-class language is inadequate as an aid and tool in abstract conceptualization: and (5) lower-class language serves as a means of social distinction which can limit opportunities for upward mobility, are discussed in light of recent research. Also discussed is the role of schooling in the perpetuation of social stratification. (Author/RLV)

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Sociocultural Dialects and School Achievement

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Much has been written regarding the differences in academic performance along class and racial lines. In reference to the case of lower class blacks, reasons such as the failure of the socialization process in black homes, personality deficits resulting from growing up in a disorganized environment, peer pressure to under achieve, failure to engage in deferred gratification, genetic deficiencies, sensory deprivation and language deprivation have been proposed (Hare, 1978). These assumptions have been held by a large number of researchers, and have provided the rationale for many programs to eliminate the deprivation of black and lower class people.

Although the paternalistic intentions of these researchers and educators may have been well meaning, this author contends that such thinking reflects an extreme ethnocentric perspective, and is not based on scientific observations of the relevant populations. Other research reveals that the patterns of black and lower class life that are so often degraded by these white middle class researchers and educators are **logical**, and often serve necessary or useful functions. The damaging affects of such claims are no where more evident than in research on sociocultural variants of the English language. This paper will deal specifically with the untenable claims concerning the presumed language deprivation of lower class blacks, and the findings of sociolinguists that refute these claims.

Although educational researchers of the sixties made no attempts to systematically study the English of lower class blacks, they uniformly agreed that the features of their English, which differed from the language variant commonly called Standard English, was a deprived substandard form of English. At the very core of this tradition, was research that went as far to claim that the speech of the lower class black child was so improverished that it

was as if he had no language at all (Bereiter et. al., 1966).

A more explicit account of the language deprivation explanation was offered by Bloom, David and Hess (1965), who wrote that:

> (1) lower class children lack abstract language -- words for categories, class names, and non-concrete ideas
>
> (2) there is more reliance on non-verbal communication in lower class homes
>
> (3) language is terse and not necessarily grammatically correct in lower class homes
>
> (4) lower class language is inadequate as an aid and tool in abstract conceptualization
>
> (5) lower class language serves as a means of social distinction which can limit opportunities for upward mobility.

These perceived deficiencies were largely the product of middle class intuitive assumptions concerning lower class speech. Educators, looking for something to blame their failure to educate lower class children at alarming rates, reasoned that linguistic differences were "fair game." To the contary, the systematic study of these differences by sociolinguists, has shown these assumptions to be unsound and unlikely as candidates for explaining the poor performance of lower class children in the schools. These investigators have shown that the relationship between the use of certain sociocultural language varieties and school failure is correlational at best. The causes for the alarmingly disproportionate rates of school failure for speakers of these varieties are not to be found in their speech or other manifestations of their culture, but within stratification practices inherent in the American social system itself. In what follows, these remarks on the deficiencies of Black English have been examined individually, and some of the research refuting them has been presented. Also, some discussion of the problems inherent in the American system of social stratification is included.

(1) Black children enter school being almost devoid of language.

Bereiter et. al. (1966) made this assessment of black pre-schoolers residing in the predominantly black neighborhood of Northwest Urbana. Having no prior experience with lower class and particularly black lower class children, and no knowledge of, or sensitivity to this culture, these researchers made blatant misinterpretations of the behavior of these children. Had they taken the time to develop some familiarity and understanding of acceptable communicative behavior in lower class black communities, they may have interpreted the "silence" of these pre-schoolers in quite a different way. Ward (1971) offers such another interpretation, following observations of lower class black children in Rosepoint, Louisiana. She notes that conversational openers and questions, which commonly occur in teachers' utterances to their students are inappropriate in adult-child interactions in this community. Her initial queries elicited only monosyllabic responses from these children. After establishing some role in the community, the children participated in limited conversation with her and at times, volunteered information.

Bereiter et. al. (1966) and Ward (1971) make different assessments of the silence they met with when attempting to converse with lower class black children. Bereiter et. al. neglected to reconize the variety of communicative systems that correspond to the variety of cultures (along class and ethnic lines) that coexist in America. They interpreted the normal behavior of lower class children not as part of a logical system having its own merits, but as a severely deficient immitation of their own white middle class communicative system.

Ward, on the other hand, observes the differences between her own patterns of language usage and those of the lower class black children of

her study, and does not make premature comparisons based on the former. After a considerable investment of time, she "discovers" that black lower class children have a wealth of verbal skills. There are times when the Rosepoint pre-schoolers are highly verbal; however, the dictates of their culture restrict the amount of "chatter" children will perform in the presence of adults. For these children, the arena for a high degree of verbal behavior is the peer group.

It is very likely that Ward's assessment of the Rosepoint child would also have been true for the children of Urbana's Northend. Ethically and empirically, Bereiter had no grounds for stygmatizing the communicative capabilities of defenseless black children as they did; however, their point of view met with national approval and funding sufficient ot launch and maintain the Headstart pre-school project , whose purpose is early language intervention, for "culturally deprived" children (Abrahams and Troike, 1972).

(2) There is more reliance on non-verbal communication in lower class homes.

Again, researchers and educators promoting the language deprivation concept, failed to either make systematic studies to support their assumptions concerning lower class peoples or to consult with experts who had. Although systematic research on non-verbal communication is a recent phenomenon, communication experts are becoming increasingly aware that non-verbal communication plays a much larger role in human interaction than it was originally thought to, for all classes and races of people. Although there is variation across class and race lines in terms of the particular gestures and what they convey, no one has attempted to segment theoretical

communicative cues to the point of making tallies across race and class lines to determine which, if any, segments of the population rely on them the most.

(3) Language is terse and not necessarily grammatical in lower class homes.

In formal linguistics, the notion of grammaticality has been found to be idiosyncratic, varying with so many linguistic and extra-linguistic elements, that linguists now see the notions of grammatical and ungrammatical as representing a continuum rather than an absolute distinction. This situation arose as judgements of grammaticalness, made by middle class, Standard English speaking linguistis themselves, varied systematically. For example, residents of eastern and midwestern rural areas of the United States (linguists included) judge both of the following to be grammatical:

He does live here anymore. (Meaning: He still lives here.)
and He does not live here anymore. (Meaning: He no longer lives here.)

Residents of both urban and rural areas in the rest of the country restrict the use of anymore to the negative statements such as:

He does not live here anymore.

As a result of instances such as this one, many linguists have abandoned the old terminology of grammaticality and now talk of varying degrees of acceptability.

Sociolinguists have made just this type of variation in speech the

their primary object of study, and formulate their linguistic descriptions on the basis of what is acceptable within a given language variety, using not the linguists' intuitions of grammaticality (or acceptability) as the determiner, but the linguistic norms of that given speech community. Concentrating their efforts on language variation, especially across ethnic, regional, and class lines, sociolinguistics are THE experts on varieties such as Black English. These sociolinguists see grammaticality or acceptability as being relative, and determined by community norms. Dialects such as Black English are considered legitimate linguistic systems based on such norms.

(4) Lower class language is inadequate as an aid and tool in abstract conceptualization

Many researchers and educators, again, without undertaking any formal study, have decided that lower class language is unfit for conveying abstract ideas and that it is suitable only for carrying concrete messages. However, the instant the empirical basis of such a claim is examined, it becomes clear that such a claim is unfounded. According to a commonly held ~~to one~~ set of assumptions, languages, dialects and speech styles can be distinguished as either abstract or concrete. Presumably, the most abstract form is a higher order than a concrete one and is better suited for conveying complex concepts. The speech patterns of the middle class have been labeled abstract, whereas those of the lower class are labeled concrete. When citing abstract characteristics of black speech, Leacock (1972) states that:

> The elaboration of the metaphor is only one of the characteristics that have been noted for black speech style. Others are the constant innovation of new terms for "in-group" interchange; the refinement of terminologies for dealing with social situations and social-psychological types; and the marked concern with linguistic strategies for manipulation, competion, or sheer entertainment... However, such linguistic concerns, when noted at all in educational circles, are characteristically considered more a matter of "expressiveness" than of intellectual ability.

Ironically, while researchers such as Bereiter et. al., and Bloom, David and Hess were making negative assessments of Black English, sociolinguists and anthropologists were paying tribute to its logic, systematicity, complexity and aesthetic value. The language deprivation model flourished in educational circles along side of systematic findings in the anthropological and linguistic sciences that denounced any claims to language deprivation. What Bereiter et. al., and Bloom, Dabid and Hess saw as deprivation, those in a better position to judge, saw as variation. They argued and documented with empirical evidence, that language is everywhere variable, across and within a given language community. They developed potentially neutral terms for these varieties. Thus, within a given language, there exists subsystems which are characteristic of their corresponding speech communities, and are equally valued in terms of their logic and cohesiveness as communicative systems.

(5) Lower class language serves as a means of social distinction which can limit opportunties for upward mobility.

In spite of the enlightened attitude towards language variation that

has emerged in the linguistic sciences, the fact remains that class and ethnic characteristics of speech are held in differential esteems. Lower class and certain ethnic varieties are discriminated against in American society. In spite of the empirical reality that all speech varieties are legitimate linguistic systems, there exists in the minds of the American public, a language hierarchy that ranks these class and ethnic varieties, as shown by subjective reaction tests (Labov, 1972). Studies of subjective reactions have found that America's hierarchy for stratifying language varieties places middle class speech at the top, as the most prestigious form of speech, and lower class speech (especially lower class black speech) at the bottom, as the least prestigious. To understand the affects of this practice practice of organizing speech varieties in terms of a social hierarchy, it is necessary to turn to writings outside the discipline of sociolinguistics. Research examinging the role of educational policy in American society has a great deal of bearing on this issue.

In explicating the affects of this practice of organizing social hierarchies, educational researchers (Sharp and Green, 1975, and Bowles, 1971) have argued that working class children, for the most part, are tracted into working class adult roles early in their school careers. This, ~~they argue~~, is not the result of any real deficencies in their speech and other manifestations of their culture, but rather the result of mechanisms inferent in the schools and society. These mechanisms, they claim, divide the upcoming labor force, preparing them for their future roles in society's economic hierarchy.

These investigators argue that in modern industrialized societies, traditional occupations have been fragmented into a greater number of unskilled and semi-skilled tasks. Hence, where once highly skilled artisans

and craftsmen were needed, an array of lesser skilled and lower paid laborers, each making only a small contribution to the creation of the final product, are employed. Within this work structure, management functions to design and supervise the work of these laborers.

Proponents of this position argue that the educational system in this country is designed to feed workers into this predetermined economic system. Because education serves the function of supplying workers for the highly statified economic system, children are programmed to fit into this hierarchy early in their school careers. Children of socio-cultural backgrounds which are perceived to be less prestigious are channeled into lower paying, lower status positions in the economic hierarchy. Thus, as Bowles (1971) informs us, schooling does not iron out social stratification, but promotes and maintains it.

Traditionally, linguists have offered a different explanation for the school failure of children from certain socio-cultural linguistic communities. Many sociolinguists (Stewart, 1971; Wolfram and Fasold, 1974) argue that lower class black children experience disproportionately high rates of school failure because of the mismatch between their home language and the one used in ~~te~~ the classroom. Stewart goes as far to say that for the lower class black child, school achievement is dependent upon his success in deciphering Standard English sentence structure.

Within psycholinguistic research, another group of investigators inadvertently discredit the use of linguistic mismatch to explain school failure. Research conducted by Lambert and Sengalowitz (~~1970~~ 1970) provides evidance that disputes the language mismatch explanation. In their experiment, English speaking Canadian children in grade one are placed in classrooms in which for two years, French is the sole medium of instruction. The puplis

all originally monolingual in English. In this astonishing short time, their achievement in language and other subjects equals that of the French and English speaking controls, taught in their own languages.

Although the results of Lambert and Sengalowitz diminish the credibility of the linguistic mismatch explanation, these results are not completely generalizable to populations such as lower class blacks. In the Lambert and Sengalowitz studies, class was held constant. Middle class English speakers were immersed into a middle class French curriculum. The language difference was the only variable. In the case of lower class black children, a lesser degree of linguistic difference exists, but the class difference is a great one. The results of the Lambert and Sengalowitz study, and the difficulties faced by lower class black children in the schools where there is a lesser degree of linguistic difference, suggest that the class difference has greater bearing on school success or failure.

However, the fact remains that the study of social dialects has particular relevance for many kinds of pedagogical problems involving language variation. One function of the schools is to inculcate, in children, the values that promote and maintain modern industrialized society. Included in these vlaues are attitudes and beliefs about language and language varieties. If the sector of society from which the children come ranks highly in the social hierarchy, the values promoted in the schools favor their academic success. In regards to speech, what the teacher, acting in accordance with this hierarchy, judges to be correct English, will be the kind of speech these children have been accustomed to hearing adults speak. If the hierarchy holds a sector in low esteem, children from this sector experience a greater degree of school failure. In this situation, the teacher, again acting in accordance with the social hierarchy, declares that certain features of his

language are unacceptable or incorrect.

Although these socio-cultural communities are aware of the low placement of their language variety on the social hierarchy, and they covertly transmit this awareness on to their children, black speakers, in particular, continue to effectively use their language patterns or dialect. This continued use is evidence of black speakers' ability to reject the negative messages transmitted by the dominant society concerning their dialect. So often, the dominant society takes black speakers' reluctance to use the dialect in the presence of non-blacks as an indication that the black community shares their negative opinions of the dialect. This is a faulty assumption, for so often this reluctance reflects a desire to preserve Black English as a medium for ingroup communication.

In light of the continued existence of sociocultural language varieties, current research in sociolinguistics has particular relevance for many kinds of pedagogical problems that arise in the schools. One function of the schools is to inculcate, in children the values that promote and maintain modern industrialized society. Included in these values are attitudes and beliefs about language and language varieties. If the sector of society from which the children come ranks highly in the social hierarchy, the values promoted in the schools favor their academic sucess. In regards to speech, what the teacher, acting in accordance with this hierarchy, judges to be correct English, will be the kind of speech these children are accustomed to hearing adults speak. If the hierarchy of the schools and society holds a sector in low esteem, children from this sector experience a greater degree of school failure. In this situation, the teacher, again acting in accordance with the social hierarchy, declares that certain

features of his language are unacceptable or incorrect; however, the child "defiantly" continues to use the dialect. Having the day-to-day proof that his dialect is an effective means of communication, the child accepts this usage as a covert message that the dialect is preferred for actual usage in all contexts. Later in life, the child differentiates the functions of the dialect and Standard English, and uses them accordingly.

Most teachers feel that it is their duty to "upgrade" the linguistic competence of their students. Few teachers are aware of the linguist's position that all dialects are adequate communication systems. Overwhemingly, teachers accept the notion that any deviations from what is commonly called Standard English, represent deficiencies to be overcome. Thus, dialect speakers are more frequently corrected when speaking or reading aloud. Cunningham (1977) using a population of teachers enrolled in a course on reading instruction, empirically demonstrated this point. Her instrument was a list of 18 sentence pairs. Each pair consisted of a Standard English sentence and a popular misreading of that sentence. Half of these were representative of common misreadings made by Standard English speakers. The others were representative of misreadings made by Black English speakers. Cunningham found that a disproportionate number of the misreadings performed by black speakers as compared to white ones was corrected by these teachers.

Cunningham's results demonstrate that which is so often assumed; i.e., that teachers view negatively the usage of dialects such as the English of many black speakers. One can only guess what affect this excessive degree of correction does to the students' self-concepts and acquisition of reading skills. To make matters worse, not only do these students suffer the stygma of being perceived as poor readers, but, as they are

disproportionately referred to speech therapists for special language work, they are implicitly taught that the dialect they use as an effective mode of communication is a pathological version of the English language. Fortunately as stated above, many black speakers, from all classes, reject these negative messages and instead adopt the belief that Black English and Standard English are differentially appropriate, according to the context and participants in the conversation, and use them accordingly.

In the course of studying sociocultural variation in language, sociolinguists have relized the educational applications of their work. It is also realized that language differences are only a small part of the complexities faced by educators in multicultural settings; however, these differences are far from being insignificant. Although the appreciation of cultural differences in speech is commendable, and has relevance to education in multicultural settings, it still leaves much to be desired. As long as populations are stratified and chanelled into predetermined roles in society, students from the lower levels of the perceived hierarchy will experience a high degree of academic failure. The research of sociolinguists must be appreciated as a step in the right direction, but should not be viewed as the solution to the total problem.

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